

Halpin ? Hagin, Chas. B.

Early in the spring of 1885, when the alarm was heralded throughout Canada that the Metis and Indians of the Northwest Territories, aroused by Louis Riel, were up in rebellion and committing serious depredations in the northern part of the territory, the writer, who had a few years previously arrived in Winnipeg from Ontario to seek his fortune, was busily engaged in learning the gentle art of "type-slinging" in a city printing establishment. He had progressed so far that he could no longer be fooled into going errands to the other printing offices to borrow a "left hand shooting stick" or a handful of "italic spaces," and was well on the way to success in his life ambition--to become a real journalist and know the business from the ground up. Being of a somewhat warlike disposition, however, when the call was made for volunteers to go to the aid of the harassed pioneers to the west, he dropped his "stick", took off his official apron, washed his hands in the thick water of the office basin, unfortunately dropping the office towel and breaking it, and with a wave of his hand to his fellow printers, hied to the recruiting office and "joined up" for his great adventure.

The 90th, of Winnipeg, had already gone to the front and was giving a good account of itself, and active preparations were under way to get another Battalion ready. So the 91st Battalion, Col. Scott, commanding, came into being.

It was composed of ten companies, recruited in different parts of Manitoba. Companies were formed at Brandon, Minnedosa, Hartney, Gimli, and other points and concentrated at Winnipeg, the battalion being 1000 strong.

The barracks was located on Lombard St., Winnipeg, and the 91st started active training, and war tactics were instilled into our young minds.

At first, owing to the fact that our officers were also new to the war game, our duties were not so hard or strenuous as we expected, but to our sorrow a couple of old country drill sergeants were taken on the strength, and our days of near ease were over. These sergeants had been used to drilling the regulars of England, and knew their drill, believe me.. And they did not seem to consider that most of us were just young boys from the effete east, not used to hardships of any kind. The way those sergeants made us work was a crime. After the day's drill was over we realized that we were soldiers, and found it a pleasure to get to our bunks and rest. Most of us did not wait for "last post" to get to bed, and were, if not too tired, asleep before "lights out". In spare moments we would congregate in groups and say what we thought of war, and drill sergeants in particular, and what we would like to do to them.

But they whipped us into shape in short order, and we were soon ready for the field. We understood left and right wheel meant the same as "gee" and "haw", and knew that halt meant stop--instead of waiting for the order to "whoa."

Then the great day approached. Orders came that the good old 91st was to take the field. We were served with scarlet tunics, which for some days we

we wore with our civvy trousers, the war department being short on military garments. As it was impossible to get the regulation equipment in time, we were then served with grey "full-cloth" trousers. You know those old time full cloth goods--about as thick as two grey wool blankets. They surely were very hot, and gave us a rather peculiar military appearance. Then to make things worse, the department found itself short of headgear. The H. B. Co. was then requisitioned to supply us with something suitable. The company evidently was long on toques, those long knitted red, white and blue ones, and we got them, and when we were out on parade, with our nice grey pants and the big red tassel of our toques gaily bobbing in the breeze, we were certainly an awe-inspiring aggregation. When we stood back and took a look at ourselves we were certain that ~~that~~ the rebels of the Northwest were licked, and with our arrival on the scene the rebellion was over. No one could look at us and keep on fighting.

Then we were equipped with those real quarter inch white leather belts and cross belts, weighing about four pounds, and the greater part of our time for the next few months was taken up keeping them white. The only bright spot in our equipment was that pipe-clay did not disfigure our ~~grey~~ grey trousers. To those trousers we lay the blame that we were never taken up to the front lines.

Then one day, amid the plaudits of thousands of Winnipeg citizens, the 91st got 1st marching orders. At the depot we were addressed by the late Hon. John Norquay, then Premier of Manitoba, and other members of the government, at the conclusion of which we bid adieu to our friends, boarded the train, and steamed for the west and glory. At Brandon and other towns en route we were enthusiastically received, and refreshments of various kinds thrust upon us--and tobacco--not Cigs--Plugs of good old T&B. Everybody seemed pleased to see us go.

Next day we arrived at Troy--now Qu'Appelle--and amid April slush and mud began the erection of our tents. Then we had a lunch, and those of us who were lucky enough to escape guard or picket duty, picked out dry spots in the tent, put down our oilcloths and blankets, turned in and shivered until the early spring sun warmed us up. The first night passed uneventfully.

However, trouble started the second night with the fall of darkness. As we were in close proximity to enemy territory, it was thought wise to double the camp guard, so a picket line, half a mile away from camp, was put out. "A" Co. was the goat on this occasion, and the writer was unlucky enough to be drawn for the picket line. Shortly after midnight, after the officer had made his rounds, a rifle shot rang out, a picket having evidently forgotten that his rifle was loaded.

This resulted in the whole camp being called to arms, and the language heard as the boys plunged through the mud to the parade ground, attempting to dress en route, must have been most disconcerting to gentle ears. It was, to say the least, a very unreasonable hour to have to get out and fight. We were got into order at last, and stood ready to meet any foe that came along. A scout was sent out to locate the guard from whose post the alarm came, and he swore that he shot at a marauder on horseback. His story did not go down very well with the rest of the battalion, they thought it was a practical joke, and from then on, every night regularly, a picket from the other companies saw and shot at a man on horseback. And every night we had to turn out at any time from 1 to 4 o'clock in the morning. When every company had had its share of the fun, the man on horseback did not appear again.

We experienced one very amusing incident while at Troy. The nights were very cold, and after the rounds had been made, the camp guards used to sneak over to the waiting room at the depot, where there was always a nice warm fire, and enjoy a cup of tea and a piece of pie. One night after talking things over the guards drowsed off in peaceful slumber, and on this night there was trouble. We had a very enthusiastic officer, Lieutenant of the Brandon Company, who wanted to have a war carried on in proper fashion. Long after he should have been sound asleep, he took a notion to make a tour of the camp. He was surprised to find some of the posts vacant, and eventually landed at the depot where he found the men asleep. He quietly gathered up the rifles and carried them to the guard tent for safe keeping. Then the guards ~~wakened~~ were awakened and not finding their rifles, made for their posts without them. Mr. Lieutenant then made a round of the posts and was apparently surprised that the men had no rifles with them. They put up some pretty good excuses, which did not go down, and received twenty-four hours heavy pack drill as their punishment.

Troy (Qu'Appelle now)--was the main point for concentration of supplies for the troops in the north country. Here daily train loads of oats, hay, and general goods and munitions were stored. Hundreds of teams were employed in freighting the supplies north, and while there were hundreds of men engaged in this business, there was never a disturbance of any kind.

After some weeks at Troy, orders came for our battalion to start for the front, and one bright morning we fell in and commenced our twenty mile hike to our first destination, Fort Qu'Appelle. We arrived there late in the evening, footsore and weary, and many of us were in so much agony with our feet that we did not care if all the Indians in the country would swoop down and relieve us. And our misery was our own fault. Not being used to walking in the heavy military boots supplied us, our feet got exceedingly hot during the

march, and at every opportunity we would wade into the ditch, get our shoes full of nice cold water, and while at the moment it gave great relief, after a time we had to keep our feet wett, or let them boil. At night our feet were par-boiled, and it was several days before we could walk with ease.

Making camp that night was a trying ordeal. Almost helpless with fatigue, footsore and hungry, we set about laying out the tent lines. After an hour or two our officers took notice of the fact that we were tired, and ordered us to leave the rest of the work until morning, and without waiting for any further orders, those of us who had our tents up unpacked our bedding and turned in, while those less fortunate took shelter wherever they could find it.

Next morning we discovered that the 65th Battalion, of Quebec, had beat us to the best camping ground, and many hard words passed between the members of the two regiments. There were also many scraps. The fact that the Quebecers were allowed out of camp with their side arms, was greatly to their advantage. The flat side of a long sword bayonet was a more impressive defensive weapon than the belts we were compelled to use. Honors were about even however; our French Canadian friends did not size up with us in stature, and we managed to hold our own. I have always thought the reason for the Quebecers disliking us were our grey full-cloth pants; and to tell the truth, we did look a little out of place beside their snappy regulation outfits. But before there was any bloodshed, the 65th was ordered westward towards Calgary, and the 91st was left in peaceful possession of the beautiful Qu'Appelle Valley.

Our camp was made on a flat between the two lakes, which at the Fort are connected by a small stream, at that time the banks of which were heavily wooded. It was an ideal and beautiful spot, the only drawback in our mind being that there was too much parade ground. It was miles in extent, and caused us much anguish, as our young officers, out to make a name for the battalion, nevered appeared to consider our feelings in the least, and would take us out and drill us on the double for hours over what we thought to be the greater portion of the Northwest Territories. They made soldiers of us, and if it had not been for our grey woolly trousers and rainbow colored toques, we could have been almost happy.

Fort Qu'Appelle at that time was a busy trading post of the H. H. Co., which had a large store and supplied the territory adjacent. There were a few other businesses at the Fort, as well as a hotel; but you had to go dry. Prohibition was in force.

Day after day news came down of much fighting north of us, most of it falling to the lot of the 90th of Winnipeg and the Mounted Police, and we looked forward to sudden orders that we move on North. They didn't come.

Gen. Middleton made a grave tactical mistake in not ordering us up to the front, for we know that when the rebels got a good look at us the war was won. Our worst news soon came, and dashed our hopes for real thrills. Col. Scott received orders to remain and do garrison duty at the Fort, guard the large quantities of supplies concentrated there and keep the large number of Indians in the territory quiet. To the west of us over the hills, was Chief Pi-a-Pot's reserve, with several hundred inhabitants, and a few miles to the east Chief Star Blanket and his braves, also numbering hundreds, had their reserve. As a rule these two Indian bands were quite well behaved, but the authorities thought that if they were given a chance they might cause some trouble. The greatest trouble we found was keeping a few of the stragglers from commandeering our provisions. We became quite friendly with these Indians.

Until one night the unexpected happened.

A settler to the east came into camp with the news that Star Blanket and his men were on the war path, heading for the Fort. With the exception of those on guard and picket duty, we were all enjoying a pleasant sleep, lulled by the soft winds blowing through the trees surrounding the valley, when the harsh notes of the bugle called us to arms. Sleepily we found our places on the parade grounds, and five companies were detailed to take the trail of the Indians. With our trusty Snyders and forty rounds of ammunition each, heavy marching order packs, etc., we started the long march to the east in the dark hours of the night. After a walk of several miles we realized what the "horrors of war" really meant, and reviled our officers for getting us up at such an outlandish hour. It was no time to have a battle, anyway; morning would have been much pleasanter. Just before daylight, an Indian encampment was spied on a bluff, and great excitement was evident immediately. Three companies were ordered to advance by rushes in open order, ten or twelve steps and lay down. It was most exciting while making the rushes, and it kept us busy guessing what part of our anatomy would absorb the first bullet. We were safer while laying down, as there were numerous gopher hills all over the place, which we could make into small shelters for our heads. And these hills were appreciated. For myself, I can say that when in the midst of a rush I spied a nice high gopher hill ahead, even if it was several yards out of my line of travel, somehow I always managed to be right behind it when I stopped. This I consider strategy.

~~Final~~ Finally we got so close to the Indian stronghold that a little scouting was considered advisable, and upon the return of our scout we learned that we had been observed by the Indians, who had quickly downed their teepees and hiked for home. All that were left was one squaw who was having trouble with

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her teepee, and a young papoose. She was quickly surrounded and captured without much trouble, and she informed us that the party was out on a berry picking expedition, and did not want to do battle with our vari-colored warriors. Then we prepared for breakfast, and once again were forced to realize that "war is H..."

Our company cook had forgotten to bring along any cream and we were forced to drink our coffee straight, and having to cook our beefsteaks on an open fire did not give him a chance to put up the menu we were used to. We, however, survived the ordeal in a soldierly manner.

But the trip was not in vain.

The officer in charge was determined that an example should be made of Star Blanket, and he started off single handed to capture him. By the way, our officer was mounted, (he made us walk, though) and being an infantry man was no rider to brag about. He had commanded a rather rough stepping horse for the trip, and with sword, side arms and field glasses beating a tatoo he started off at a trot. Presently the horse started to canter, and the landscape was soon dotted with military accoutrements. He got his man, brought him to camp and detailed a few men to take the back trail and pick up the various articles of warfare that had bounced off him. After a few preliminary manouvres we were wheeled into line and headed towards home.

Happier days came upon us. At last sufficient nice blue military trousers with nice little red stripes down the legs, arrived and were served out to us, which together with jaunty little Glengarry caps, ~~which~~ made us just too sweet looking for anything. There was a rush on the looking-glass supply of the Fort, and we felt that at last we could look the world in the face and smile.

With drills, fatigues, and guard duty, the long summer slowly passed. Word was coming down from the north that our troops were carrying everything before them; that Riel had been captured together with his lieutenants; that Big Bear and his men had surrendered; that other tribes had gone back to their reserves, and we knew that our days of military life were numbered.

Troops began making preparations for the journey home--their duty done. The Montreal Garrison Artillery, stationed at Regina, was the first to leave for the east, but as things were still in a very unsettled state it was not advisable to leave Regina unprotected. Our battalion being closest to that city, was ordered to send two companies there. "A" and "B" co.'s of the 91st were sent on to Regina.

Riel and his lieutenants were in jail there, and the town was filled to overflowing with hundreds of witnesses from near and far, whites, Indians and breeds. The remaining days passed uneventfully; Riel, was, tried, convicted, and sentenced. There was no more need of us.

Orders soon came for us to rejoin our battalion and proceed to Winnipeg where we would be disbanded. This was done, and in a very short time the men of the 91st, Col. Scott's Battalion, were scattered to the four corners of the Dominion.

The majority of our members have crossed the Great Divide, but we know that those who survive still have a warm spot in their hearts for the old battalion.

Here's to the old 91st.

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